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TEACHER VOICE: A Teacher Reflects on “Professional” Certification

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The heat is off at the school, and my hands are cold as I type. It's a Sunday morning that carries into an afternoon and finally spills over into evening hours. In my second year teaching- I am torn between completing an assignment for my professional certification, pre-assessment class, or working on lesson plans for the week so my first graders will be engaged in their learning. Professionally, what is the better choice? Frustration bubbles up under my fingers as they type words that will define me as an educator. I fill page after page explaining my credibility as a teacher and how I plan to work towards professional growth in the future. Monday comes, and I arrive at school early to prep my lessons... as the bell rings, my students come walking through the classroom door.

If I consider my life as a book, the professional certification process has found its way onto the pages of several chapters in my life, even writing itself into previous chapters and somehow foreshadowing chapters not yet written. It is not a story that I can claim as my own because so many others have similar stories, only differing by titles, characters and settings. My story belongs in the section of the library reserved for the first group of new educators to enter the trenches of the professional certification process in the state of Washington. Although I am now in my sixth year of teaching and have finished and received my professional teaching certificate in the mail just weeks ago, I continue

to reflect on the experience and wonder if it has helped or hindered me as a professional.

As I completed my first year teaching, I and all the other new educators or educators new to Washington State, were entering a new era of professional requirements. It would be the first year teachers entering the field of education would have to obtain a professional certification to continue teaching in the state. It would be the last year that these requirements would not leave a mark in the chapters and pages of our professional lives, and sadly it would mark the final chapter for some of our friends and colleagues.

I completed my first year as an educator, riding on my enthusiasm and desire to fulfill my dream to teach. This was a dream that I carried in my pocket almost fifteen years before taking it out, opening it up and putting it into action. As an eight year old, I stumbled across the person that would help me create a path to my future. The things Mrs. Medved taught me were deeper than the books I read and would last long after I had used-up my crayons that school year. I learned more than just the curriculum assigned to my grade level as a third grader; I learned what I wanted to become in life. I fulfilled my first year of teaching not knowing what would lie ahead over the next four years. I was entering into the pro-cert with blind ambition and eager enthusiasm to do whatever it would take to be dubbed as a professional in the world of

education. This was a title I had thought I'd earned a year earlier with all the other scholars that received their diplomas when we walked across the stage at graduation. Already working eleven to twelve hour days and Sundays as a new educator, I began an endeavor to obtain my Professional Certificate. I was determined to earn the title (of a professional educator.)

By the time I received my professional teaching certificate, my entire life had changed around me. I would meet the man I would marry, change schools, buy a house, invite a student teacher into my classroom, have a baby and change schools once again. My sense of self was evolving on warp speed in both my personal life and professional life.

The pre-assessment class was my first taste of the requirements expected of me by the state to earn the distinguished title, "Professional". In this class we would be making an outline of our professional obligations as teachers and begin to self-reflect on areas of improvement. I liked the sound of that! I considered myself an individual who valued and understood the importance of being a reflective individual. It sounded like what I was asking of my students. I want children to be reflective in their learning, and what better way to guide children through this process then to model it for them myself? Unfortunately, the class did not fulfill the promise. After visiting and revisiting the criteria of the pro-cert and trying to pull from the class what I needed to be successful as a teacher, I finished my pre-assessment feeling drained, overwhelmed and lost as a new teacher. For the first time in my entire life, I questioned if this truly was the vocation for me.

At that same moment there were other teachers experiencing the same concerns and doubts. I decided teaching is my passion, and I was not going to be another statistic. I knew that the intention behind the process of the professional certification was not to frustrate new educators, but rather to hold us accountable and make us reflective in our teaching. (This was not going to be the last chapter as a teacher for me, professional or not.)

I moved forward, knowing that during the

next part of the certification process I would have the chance to show ownership and be empowered by choosing classes that I thought would help improve my teaching. In the core classes, we would be collecting evidence and filling in the outlines created in the pre-assessment class. Completing the core classes was a way for me to focus upon the specific areas on which I thought I could improve as a teacher. The experiences and the information that I gained from my core classes were priceless. I took the classes needed to fulfill the requirements of the core over my third and fourth year teaching. Professionally, I had developed skills that would benefit my students' needs.

As I teach my children today, I think about how important it is to allow them to have a voice in their learning. I make certain to give them options and choices so they establish genuine ownership of what they have learned. Through all the rough, ups and downs of pre-assessment, I reflect today and realize I walked away from the class learning this very valuable lesson.

After my third year of teaching, I moved to a new school. I packed my boxes at the end of the school year, marked one with the title PRO- CERT, and headed into the next chapter of my life. I married that summer and would enter a new school, teaching with a different last name. That year, at Open House, I was asked by a parent if it was my first year teaching. When I explained that I had taught three years at a previous school, the gentleman looked at me puzzled and said, "You know... that's what someone told me but I asked a friend who has children at that school and he said he has never heard of you." It was as if my positive identity as an educator had disappeared with my maiden name. With the move to my new neighborhood and new school, somehow I had forgotten the moving box that carried with it what little experience I had as far as the new parents of my students were concerned. However, this was only one of the things I would lose with the move. I would open the box titled PRO-CERT only to find out that most of my hard work and time spent writing papers during the pre-assessment class would be useless to me during the remainder of my journey through the Professional Certification Process.

I had changed schools, my address and my last name. And like these aspects of change in my personal life the professional certification was no exception in my professional life.

I had invested so much time into what I thought were the requirements to receive my professional certification, and now it was evolving just like me. With just my Culminating Seminar to finish, my ambition was being broken down again by feelings of frustration. However my frustration was readily replaced by enthusiasm when I was asked that same year to mentor a student teacher. Under the new criteria for the pro-cert, I needed to work on collecting evidence of advocacy and leadership as a fairly new educator. As I hosted my student teacher during my third year of teaching, it proved to be an opportunity not just to help her grow as a teacher. It would mark an important chapter in my own professional life.

As a mentor teacher, I began going over the criteria of the professional certification with her. I never spoke about it with a negative tone. I explained to her how she could apply what she was doing in our classroom to the professional certification and showed her what kind of evidence she might start collecting as a teacher. I recognized in her the same spark that I had as a beginning teacher, and I wanted her to view the profession with dignity, pride, and the honor that comes with being part of such a great profession! If she had a head start, she might have a positive experience with the certification process and not feel overwhelmed. I ended my third year ready to fulfill my last class that would be apart of the Professional Certification Program.

The culminating seminar was the last class for the program. Throughout this class we would organize what we had collected, polish it and pull it all together, reflecting upon how far we had come as educators and what we would do to continue self-growth. I would begin the class when I was six months pregnant. Once again my personal life and my professional life would entwine. All the changes with the certification over the last five years caused many of my classmates, myself included, to revisit and start over on

many of our pieces that we originally completed during the pre-assessment class. Once again I would meet a person who would help me obtain and continue on a positive path to finishing the professional certification. I had gotten this far, and the professor for the culminating seminar class was not going to let me shut the book with one chapter to go. Without her guidance, I may have not finished the program when I did.

My philosophy of education has changed in many aspects from the time I began teaching until now, but the metaphor I use to describe my philosophy has been consistently the same. Educators are much like gardeners, trying to grow the best flowers, vegetables, and herbs we can. We don't always have control over the weather, and we aren't always given the best soil, but we continue to plant the seeds of learning. We watch out after our gardens and give them everything we can to help them grow.

This metaphor also can be applied to new educators entering the profession of teaching and coming face-to-face with the new state requirements. The state of Washington is on the right track with The Professional Certification. The idea behind holding teachers accountable is important, but perhaps those cultivating the program should consider acting as compost instead of weed killer. The professional certification does not itself give teachers what is needed to be a successful educator, it is simply a garden tool. It is a long process that teachers will complete if they really want to teach. Sometimes weed killer can damage the healthiest plants when they are struggling in other areas. We must help find a way to hold teachers accountable and enable them to reflect without damaging any of the new roots and seeds that could blossom into the best and brightest in the field.

New teachers are planted into a school, ready to use their enthusiasm to soak up every new and exciting experience possible. I was fortunate as a new teacher to have mentors that acted as sunlight to help me continue to grow past all the pebbles and clumps that can get in one's way of clearing the dirt and seeing the light.